

COURT BACKS SCHOOL IN AI CHEATING CASE: 5 THINGS YOUR SCHOOL CAN DO TO AVOID TROUBLE

Insights
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A federal judge in Massachusetts recently upheld a school district's decision to discipline a student for using artificial intelligence for a class project, setting some good ground rules for how your school might best address academic dishonesty in the AI age. In a November 20 ruling, the court rejected a request by the parents of a Boston-area high school senior to expunge their son's disciplinary record and adjust his grade after he was accused of AI-based plagiarism. What happened in this case and what are the five steps your school can take to ensure you are best positioned for this new era?

Teacher Finds Evidence of AI Use During Class Project

It's important to know that the court record developed as of now is preliminary in nature, and the student and his parents will have an opportunity to further gather evidence and make additional arguments that may lead to a different result.

The controversy began in December 2023 when a student at Hingham High School – identified only as "RNH" in court filings – submitted a project for an AP U.S. History class. RNH partnered with another student on the assignment, and their teacher quickly suspected their material had been heavily influenced by AI.

- She said she ran the project through three different AI detection tools. All flagged significant portions of the script as likely AI-generated.

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Jennifer B. Carroll

Partner, Co-chair K-12
Institutions

[954.847.4716](tel:954.847.4716)



Kristin L. Smith

Partner, Co-chair K-12
Institutions

- She claimed that large chunks of text were cut and pasted from an AI-driven writing tool.
- She said that some citations in the submission included entirely fictitious sources likely created as AI “hallucinations” such as *Hoop Dreams: A Century of Basketball* written by “Robert Lee” and *Muslim Pioneers: The Spiritual Journey of American Icons* written by “Jane Doe.”
- She says that the revision history in the digital document showed RNH spent less than an hour working on the submission, compared to seven to nine hours spent by other students on similar assignments.

Concluding that the students had violated the school’s academic integrity rules, the teacher gave them failing grades for the plagiarized portions of the project (but allowed them an opportunity to start fresh on the final phase). RNH received a Saturday detention and was barred from induction into the National Honor Society (NHS).

Classroom Discipline Leads to Court Litigation

His parents fought back. In September 2024, they filed a federal lawsuit, claiming the school was punishing their son retroactively and unfairly. They alleged the school was jeopardizing RNH’s chances of early admission to elite colleges.

- The lawsuit alleged procedural and substantive due process violations, arguing that the penalties against RNH were unwarranted and excessive.
- They argued that the student handbook and the district’s formal policy didn’t discuss the use of AI at the time of the incident, leaving students like RNH to navigate a gray area without direction (notwithstanding evidence presented to court that the school gave students a “written expectations” document on Academic Dishonesty and AI at the beginning of the school year).
- They also discovered that the school had allowed seven other students with academic integrity infractions to be inducted into NHS over the past two years.

They sought immediate relief and asked the court for an order to immediately expunge RNH’s disciplinary record and amend his grade. They said they needed this immediate

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court intervention because the school's actions were putting his academic future at risk.

Within a week of an October 22 court hearing, the school reversed its decision to bar RNH from NHS. But it did not relent on the other forms of discipline, and the case proceeded.

Court Sides With School on Initial Injunction Request

On November 20, the judge sided with the school in response to the parents' request for a preliminary injunction. In sum, his 47-page order found that the school had acted within its rights.

- He determined that the district's academic integrity rules were clear enough to encompass AI misuse. The core of the case was not about AI, he said, but straightforward academic dishonesty. He concluded that RNH, a high-achieving student, should have understood that copying and pasting AI-generated content violated those standards – even if the handbook didn't specifically mention AI.
- He considered the fact that the school conducted a detailed investigation and not rush to judgment before imposing discipline.
- He also rejected the notion that federal courts should second-guess the decisions of teachers and administrators, particularly in cases involving academic integrity. He ruled that the penalties imposed were within the school's reasonable discretion.

What's Next?

The Harrises' attorney said that they would continue with their case despite this initial setback. The parents will now have an opportunity to conduct detailed discovery to try to further their case, but have lost their first chance to immediately wipe the slate clean. We'll track this case as it continues to wind its way through the court system and a more detailed record is created.

5 Ways to Adapt to AI Challenges

The ruling sends a clear message about your need to address AI's growing role in the classroom. Here are five practical steps you can take:

1. Develop Clear AI Policies

Explicitly outline your school's expectations for AI use in your academic integrity policies. Define what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable use, such as using AI for brainstorming vs. copying and pasting AI-generated text.

2. Educate Students and Teachers

Incorporate lessons on AI literacy into the curriculum. Teach students to critically evaluate AI-generated content, verify sources, and properly cite their tools. At the same time, train teachers to recognize AI-related misconduct and integrate AI responsibly into assignments.

3. Leverage Detection Tools

Invest in reliable AI detection software – but don't overly rely on this technology. Make sure you also apply human judgment before reaching any conclusion. Combining tech with human oversight is the best way to provide a fair evaluation of suspected misuse.

4. Document Investigations Thoroughly

Like with any potential student disciplinary case, maintain detailed records of your investigative process. In this case, the court was impressed by all of the steps the teacher took before forming a conclusion, each step well documented. Make sure you can do the same in any case that arises at your school.

5. Engage Stakeholders

Collaborate with parents, students, and educators when designing – and rolling out – AI policies. Transparency and involvement can foster understanding and reduce the likelihood of disputes.

Conclusion

We will continue to monitor developments on this case, so make sure you are subscribed to [Fisher Phillips' Insight System](#) to keep up with the most up-to-date information. Should you have any questions, please consult your Fisher Phillips attorney, the authors of this Insight, any attorney in our [AI, Data, and Analytics Practice Group](#), or any attorney on our [Education Team](#).